

Practice Paper III



From Social Identity Theory and previous research on the homeless, it was hypothesized that the identity strategies used by the homeless would differ as a function of longevity of homelessness: the short-term homeless would be less likely to identify themselves as homeless, while the longer-term homeless would identify themselves as homeless.

A covert participant observation was used for the study. The data were collected by the researcher in her role as a regular volunteer helper at a night-shelter. Only

questions that would occur naturally were asked, and care was taken not to cause distress. In addition, participants remained anonymous. Hence, there were no 'foreseeable threats to their psychological well-being, health, values or dignity.'

The researcher had acted as a volunteer at the shelter for two years. She knew many of the homeless at the shelter prior to the study. For the fieldwork, a total of 26 hours was spent conversing with homeless individuals over a three-month period, either in the evening or in the morning. Observations and conversations were recorded in a journal at home immediately after each session. Each participant was talked with on at least two occasions during the fieldwork period, but many of them had known the researcher before the study period. If it appeared that the participant wanted to speak with the researcher, then she would sit down with them and allow the participant to direct the conversation; conversation could last from 15 minutes to over an hour. On rarer instances, the researcher would speak with more than one participant at a time, or overhear conversations between the homeless or between the homeless and other volunteers.

At the end of the fieldwork period, the contents of the journal were organized into self-report portraits about each person. Their comments were then analyzed individually to ascertain whether they identified with a group label or group members. The amount of time that each participant had been homeless was based on self-report.

Findings supported that those who had not been homeless for long, saw themselves as "temporarily having difficulties," but did not identify themselves as homeless, and did not develop relationships with those who had been homeless for a longer time.

Source: Farrington, A & Peter Robinson. *Homelessness and Strategies of Identity Maintenance*; *Journal of Community Appl. Soc. Psychol.* 9: 175±194 (1999).

Questions

1. Explain the advantages of using a covert participant observation for this study.
2. Discuss how the data for this study would be analyzed.
3. Describe how reflexivity could be used in this study.